

CHAPTER LXX

The Minstrel Leads Off With A Paddle-Song; And A Message Is Received From Abroad

From seaward now came a breeze so blithesome and fresh, that it made us impatient of Babbalanja's philosophy, and Mohi's incredible legends. One and all, we called upon the minstrel Yoomy to give us something in unison with the spirited waves wide-foaming around us.

"If my lord will permit, we will give Taji the Paddle-Chant of the warriors of King Bello."

"By all means," said Media.

So the three canoes were brought side to side; their sails rolled up; and paddles in hand, our paddlers seated themselves sideways on the gunwales; Yoomy, as leader, occupying the place of the foremast, or Bow-Paddler of the royal barge.

Whereupon the six rows of paddle-blades being uplifted, and every eye on the minstrel, this song was sung, with actions corresponding; the canoes at last shooting through the water, with a violent roll.

(All.)

Thrice waved on high,

Our paddles fly:
Thrice round the head, thrice dropt to feet:
And then well timed,
Of one stout mind,
All fall, and back the waters heap!

(Bow-Paddler.)

Who lifts this chant?
Who sounds this vaunt?

(All.)

The wild sea song, to the billows' throng,
Rising, falling,
Hoarsely calling,
Now high, now low, as fast we go,
Fast on our flying foe!

(Bow-Paddler.)

Who lifts this chant?
Who sounds this vaunt?

(All.)

Dip, dip, in the brine our paddles dip,
Dip, dip, the fins of our swimming ship!
How the waters part,
As on we dart;

Our sharp prows fly,
And curl on high,
As the upright fin of the rushing shark,
Rushing fast and far on his flying mark!

Like him we prey;
Like him we slay;
Swim on the fog,
Our prow a blow!

(Bow-Paddler.)

Who lifts this chant?
Who sounds this vaunt?

(All.)

Heap back; heap back; the waters back!
Pile them high astern, in billows black;
Till we leave our wake,
In the slope we make;
And rush and ride,
On the torrent's tide!

Here we were overtaken by a swift gliding canoe, which, bearing down upon us before the wind, lowered its sail when close by: its occupants signing our paddlers to desist.

I started.

The strangers were three hooded damsels the enigmatical Queen Hautia's heralds.

Their pursuit surprised and perplexed me. Nor was there wanting a vague feeling of alarm to heighten these emotions. But perhaps I was mistaken, and this time they meant not me.

Seated in the prow, the foremost waved her Iris flag. Cried Yoomy, "Some message! Taji, that Iris points to you."

It was then, I first divined, that some meaning must have lurked in those flowers they had twice brought me before.

The second damsel now flung over to me Circe flowers; then, a faded jonquil, buried in a tuft of wormwood leaves.

The third sat in the shallop's stern, and as it glided from us, thrice waved oleanders.

"What dumb show is this?" cried Media. "But it looks like poetry: minstrel, you should know."

"Interpret then," said I.

"Shall I, then, be your Flora's flute, and Hautia's dragoman? Held

aloft, the Iris signified a message. These purple-woven Circe flowers mean that some spell is weaving. That golden, pining jonquil, which you hold, buried in those wormwood leaves, says plainly to you--
Bitter love in absence."

Said Media, "Well done, Taji, you have killed a queen." "Yet no Queen Hautia have these eyes beheld."

Said Babbalanja, "The thrice waved oleanders, Yoomy; what meant they?"

"Beware--beware--beware."

"Then that, at least, seems kindly meant," said Babbalanja; "Taji, beware of Hautia."